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Reclaiming Information, Rebuilding Stories: Reinventing Fundamental Rights

Hilde Van Gelder

> I can't speak for everyone involved in this hobby…, but for me, this is about democracy. There are elements out there who want to keep everything secret. I try to put pressure in the other direction. I try to put checks on that power. When people ask me about what gives me the right to make these decisions, I say, "Citizenship in a democracy gives me the right to make these decisions." I don't break in, I don't steal stuff. I assert my right to study the things that are in orbit around the earth and study them with the belief that space belongs to all of us. I exercise my right to know what's there.
>
> Satellite hobbyist Ted Molzcan[1]

Prelude: Filling the "Holes"

On the front cover of Allan Sekula's exhibition catalogue *Polonia and Other Fables* is a picture from the artist's photographic sequence bearing the same title.[2] It represents the traditional motif of a field worker, with his right arm holding a tool while his left arm hangs loosely beside it. The photograph is captioned "Farmer threshing grass at abandoned airport used by CIA for transport of clandestine 'high' value terrorism suspects. Szymany, Poland, July 2009." This work forms the middle image of a triptych.[3] In that constellation, on the left is a picture of a sign panel oddly installed—actually, misaligned—in the midst of lake. This threatening yellow panel says "MILITARY AREA KEEP OUT NO ENTRY"; and to make sure that everybody really understands, the phrase is printed in four languages—Polish, English, German, and Russian. The caption of the photograph says,

1 As quoted in Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World* (London: Penguin Books, 2010 [2009]), 118.
2 This essay is dedicated to the memory of Allan Sekula (1951–2013).
3 The triptych is reproduced as ill. 4, 5, and 6 on pp. 10–12 of Allan Sekula, *Polonia and Other Fables*, exhib. cat. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, and Warsaw, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 2009).

"CIA black site seen from across the lake just before the wrong film was confiscated. Kiejkuły, Poland, July 2009." The third picture is one of the very same billboard attached to a steel gate, which is highly protected by barbed wire and by a surveillance camera. The caption reads, "CIA black site seen from the bushes. Kiejkuły, Poland, July 2009."

In her contribution to the catalogue, the curator of the Polish venue of the exhibition, Karolina Lewandowska, tells us a story. It is the story of a "wild trip through places, memories, book quotations, and pieces of political news" that resulted in Sekula's *Polonia and Other Fables*.[4] In the summer of 2009, Sekula and Lewandowska decided to embark on a field trip through Poland. It would take them to various places, and among them, "invisible cities," as Lewandowska in her essay appropriately borrows the phrasing from Italo Calvino. When the two of them visited the former military airfield in Szymany (in Northeast Poland), they find it owned by an Israeli businessman and leased to a local farmer, who disposes of "modern-looking German tractors." The farmer also appears to run an "elegant B&B" on the site, and no further news is to be obtained from him with regard to potential CIA planes that would have made a stop there while transporting "top-level terrorist suspects."

They travel on to nearby Kiejkuły, a small settlement in the Lake District. Persistent rumors go that there is one of the secret places where the CIA may have operated a so-called "black site." In her text, Lewandowska narrates in full detail how they were scared off on repeated occasions both by nervous local people and by an off-road patrol car while sneaking around in the woody area surrounding the site, until they were finally stopped by another patrol, and Sekula was forced to pull the film out of his camera. Sekula recalled this extremely stressful working episode to me in conversation while he was installing *Polonia and Other Fables* at the Renaissance Society in Chicago in September 2009. He proudly brought to mind—in his prototypical, charmingly jocular tone—how he had been prepared to mislead guards and play the "magic trick" he had known since he started out as an artist, especially when photographing sites that are sensitive from a military perspective, most famously while making *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972), 25 diapositives made inside of the General Dynamics Conair Division Aerospace Factory in San Diego. The final image of that sequence clearly shows how the artist needs to pull down his camera and hide it from the concierge in the moment when he gets caught.

Sekula then planted the seeds for a lifelong artistic project that would embrace, among other topics, a militant fascination for the gruesome reality of this "dark geography of the Pentagon's secret world," as Trevor Paglen has

4 Karolina Lewandowska, "Stories…," in Sekula, *Polonia and Other Fables*, 117. All further quotations are on the same page.

identified it.[5] Both Sekula and Paglen have been actively tracing this so-called "black world."[6] As Brian Holmes has argued in the context of the work of Paglen, the photographs that are the result of such research provide a visual "clue, an index rather than a document, strictly speaking," of the existence of these "invisible cities."[7] The "invisible geography" of the black world has turned blank spots on the map into the darkest possible holes. Photography and film have played a double game in the coming about of this situation: they are, as Holmes, as well, says, "on both sides of the fence."[8] They have become key complicit media for both the creation and maintenance of this hidden world. They are used for surveillance activities, and also—among others—implicated in the functioning of spy satellites, drones, or submarines.

At the same time, nevertheless, not only artists like Sekula and Paglen, but also Harun Farocki—often at the risk of their own safety—have courageously conducted research toward putting photography and film to the service of "experimental geography," as Paglen says.[9] They investigate how these media can be integrated into an artistic context and thus contribute to unveiling what the military complex intends to hide from the public. From a more activist perspective, their artworks also aim to provide a countervisuality to the all too familiar propagandistic military image. These artists seek to create images that both contain a potential of social resistance and can contribute to the production of "new spaces." These "new spaces," which they imagine and propose via their works, are meant to come and fill in the dark "holes." They somehow need to leak into this darkness, and bring back both light and enlightenment. They serve to replace darkness by "new forms of democracy and freedom."

Body (Bags) for Progress?

Harun Farocki and Allan Sekula exhibited together late in 2010, in a group show that was curated by both Antje Ehmann and Farocki himself and held at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University. Entitled *The Image in Question: War—Media—Art*, the exhibition was a

5 Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map*.

6 Ibid, xii. Cf. also Trevor Paglen, *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me: Emblems from the Pentagon's Black World* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008).

7 Brian Holmes, "Visiting the Planetarium. Images of the Black World," in *Trevor Paglen*, exhib. cat. (Vienna: Secession, 2010), 8.

8 Ibid., 18.

9 Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space," *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 6, 2009), n.p. Available at: http://www.brooklynrail.org/2009/03/express/experimental-geography-from-cultural-production-to-the-production-of-space, last accessed Sept. 13, 2013. The following quotations are from the same essay.

landmark for investigating how, as the curators put it, "the military image can be re-appropriated or…countered."[10] On the occasion of a visit to Allan Sekula's studio in Los Angeles in May 2013, I came across a relatively small, green chalkboard. It occupied a central position close to the artist's desk, and said: "War w/o Bodies scans to Farocki." We started talking about the impact and importance of this exhibition. To Sekula, it was a key tool for "unraveling the visual discourse of war."[11] The show aimed to contribute to understanding how the contemporary military apparatus violates the basic checks and balances of modern democracy, not only via a mechanism of hiding information but also, and more proactively, via secretly organized activities. According to the constitutional rules in force in Western democracies since the Enlightenment, citizens have the right to information. This appears all the more true as they contribute to the realization of military operations—including the hidden ones—via paying public taxes.

In the Harvard show, Sekula thus exhibited *War Without Bodies* (1991), a photographic sequence that is accompanied by an essay bearing the same title. In it, Sekula focuses—among other elements—on how the military apparatus makes no effort to keep body bags of killed soldiers out of the public's view. He identifies this mechanism as the "Tom Clancy" version of war: basically, the only bodies that are distributed by the military propaganda machine "are those of military technicians" (and of their glorious commanders, one may add).[12] He calls them "*these bodies* [emphasis in original], subject to an almost microscopic attention…precisely enumerated first world bodies."[13] The shadow side of the glorifying images of "these" bodies are "*those bodies* [emphasis in original], many of them, too many of them, too many to look at, too many to count, as if the refusal to count was the crowning virtue of a higher morality, of a humanist revulsion against the quantification of death."

In conversation, Thomas Keenan and Trevor Paglen make a plea for taking the specters of "those bodies," which they also more generally call "ghosts," seriously—both within and beyond the human rights community. For it is these ghosts, write Paglen and A. C. Thompson, who represent the "dark underside to globalization."[14] It is they, the specters, all those bodies that have been erased from memory, who unmask a myth. They point at our collective insanity when we tend to believe that we now live in a "non-

10 Antje. Ehmann and Harun Farocki statement about "The Image in Question" available at: http://www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/imageinquestion.html#sekula2, last accessed Sept. 13, 2013.
11 Conversation between Allan Sekula and Hilde Van Gelder in the artist's studio in Los Angeles on May 31, 2013. A video recording of this conversation exists.
12 Allan Sekula, "War Without Bodies," in *Dismal Science. Photo Works 1972–1996* (Normal, IL: University Galleries, 1999), 212–13.
13 Ibid., 217. The following quotations are on the same page.
14 Trevor Paglen and A. C. Thompson, *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2007 [2006]), 114.

Euclidian geography," in which each and every one is instantly connected via digital technology, and in which spatial distances have finally been overcome.[15] Paglen insists on the full "materiality" of the black world, even if it is perfectly capable of making people disappear into "ghosts."[16] There are indeed the disturbing examples of innocent civilians killed, not in the least accidentally, by a drone, or people who have disappeared forever, without a single trace, after having been put on a CIA rendition flight. Paglen focuses on reconstructing situations, based on the little information that is available: for example, the identity of the transportation planes instead of the names of people, in the case of the renditions. These planes aren't ghosts at all; they have concrete tail numbers and names. They ship both "these" and "those" human bodies all over the world. His writings and his photographic images prove that perfectly well.

This type of engaged research by means of art serves to counterbalance a media-dominated public discourse that, as Sekula argues, together with its emphasis on "our military technicians," also too exclusively focuses on "*our* bodies [emphasis in original]": on us, who tend to avoid confronting the physical reality of it all.[17] This art means to warn us, who tend to imagine that we comfortably observe the horrifying spectacle from a safe distance only: we tend to dismiss what is really going on behind the media-oriented curtains of heroic, military muscular language as an abstract "game," only virtually played in "our" peaceful world. That it is materially played out in a faraway nowhere land—where "they" live, the enemy aliens—is comfortably erased from our discourse.

Harun Farocki's *War at a Distance* (2003) perfectly illustrates that shocking tension between the fairy tale of today's increasingly digitalized warfare on one hand and the often staggeringly tragic circumstances in the production factory—both on a human and on an ecological level—on the other hand. *War at a Distance* thus addresses the darkest shadow sides of technological progress, via rendering visible what can be described as zones of abstraction; that is, spaces that are smuggled away. Farocki draws our attention to what always ends up being swept under the carpet, to that which is so incomprehensible that one allows it, unforgivably, to slip away. Yet he also lucidly confronts us with the ambiguity of the situation that his works seek to investigate. He sharply reminds us how, thanks to technological discoveries made during the Second World War—under the influence of the urgency of the circumstances—we now have computers, stereo sound, and solid air planes. We are able to detect mines, can construct technically complex bridges, and have GPS technology. He thus illustrates

15 Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map*, 43.
16 Ibid., 36.
17 Sekula, "War Without Bodies," 217.

how photography—and film—have, from a very early stage of development, been integrated into and put to the service of the military complex. What mankind has been able to retrieve from this is indeed inestimable.

But, Farocki justly wonders, do we really need a war in order to be able to make this kind of progress? There can be no doubt that the cost of destruction—of humans, animals and nature—is too high. As Trevor Paglen adds to the discussion, one should not forget that it is ethically irremissible that those experiments are taking place in the poorest of all countries, where people are defenseless and made speechless. He and A. C. Thompson take the example of Afghanistan to substantiate that:

> It's easy to imagine that when the Americans came to Afghanistan, they must have seen what Augustus had seen in the German forest, or what King Leopold had seen in the uncharted recesses of the Congo: a space beyond the recognizable world; a dark, lawless space; an incoherent, incomprehensible space. A space where anything could happen. And somehow, in turn, imagination became reality. The act of seeing a space where anything could happen helped create a space where anything would happen. Afghanistan became a space in the image of the improvised and irregular CIA and Special Forces units. A space without uniforms, where it's unclear who is working for whom. Where violence is like the architecture: ad hoc, informal.[18]

Paglen and Thompson describe a perfidious mechanism, an eternal return of searching for a "heart of darkness," a space beyond reasonable control. What kind of progress are we pretending to make when the price that we are paying is the creation of spaces where "anything can happen"? How terribly shortsighted are we to think that this could not happen to us, but only to "them"?

Striking in Harun Farocki's *War at a Distance* is both its repetitive image strategy and the triumphalist music that accompanies it. This brings to mind not only the endless hours that militaries spend rehearsing before simulation machines, always "playing" the same scene over and over again, but also the many stories about soldiers who listen to stimulating music while engaging in effective battle.[19] The film's tactics therefore appear to aim at putting the spectator in a sort of dream state that resembles this trance of the battlefield. For those who effectively engage with Farocki's work this way, a deep involvement with its addressed themes becomes possible: one imagines and feels how the screaming music contrasts sharply with the absolute silence surrounding all "those" bodies that we've somehow lost trace of.

18 Paglen and Thompson, *Torture Taxi*, 150–51.

19 This is an issue that was also addressed in what has now become a reference exhibition for this topic, namely *Anti-Photojournalism*, curated by Carles Guerra and Thomas Keenan at La Virreina Centre de la imatge, Barcelona, July 6 – October 10, 2010.

War at a Distance thus contributes to going against the grain of predominant popular media discourse, all too often complicit in silencing out "those" bodies while excessively focusing on these few among us who are in control. Striking examples of that can be taken from corporate mass media on an almost everyday basis. One occurrence in the summer of 2013 may serve to illustrate that. In mid-July—a time when the media are looking for compelling material, given the summer recess—worldwide media reported that Russian president Vladimir Putin had pulled off his "James Bond villain impression" while having himself photographed in a Hollywoodesque mini-submarine that was about to disappear underwater in the Gulf of Finland.[20] The world watched with awe at this enigmatic picture, obviously meant as a promotional stunt towards the international community. Several images of the event circulate on the World Wide Web. They confirm Sekula's hypothesis about the "Clancy version of war": aside from Putin, the only bodies that can be spotted in these images are those of military technicians sitting next to and behind him.[21]

Official information that was communicated was scarce. It said that the submarine had dived 164 feet under water in order to enable the Russian president to examine the wreck of a 19th-century frigate. Whether this was indeed just a "tourist trip," or whether Putin also went down to observe other elements of interest in this area of considerable strategic importance for Russia, we will never know. But what we can do is observe the image carefully and read what it visually tells us. In the catalogue essay, "War without Bodies," Allan Sekula identifies the submarine as "a machine [that] becomes the object of an almost erotic fascination."[22] Sekula's own artistic answer to this (historical) use of the submarine as a phallic object put on stage for propaganda imagery has been images of "men and boys fingering gun barrels in a disturbing intermingling of war and sex."[23] These photographs were included in the *War Without Bodies* exhibition. The overall setting of this work is confrontational: the images can be observed by visitors while sitting on a field hospital stretcher. Spectators can read the accompanying essay at the same time, as a printout is waiting for them on the stretcher. On a more cynical note, they can even make themselves comfortable and lie down on the bed while engaging in reading.

20 Amanda Williams, "We Have Been Expecting You, 007! Russian Leader Putin Goes Full Bond Baddie in his Mini-Submarine," available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2364513/Vladimir-Putin-pulls-Bond-villain-impression-trip-research-sub.html, last accessed Sept. 13, 2013.

21 Cf., for example: http://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-07-16/russian-president-vladimir-putin-takes-trip-in-mini-submarine/, last accessed Sept. 13, 2013.

22 Sekula, "War Without Bodies," 213.

23 Debra Risberg, "Imaginary Economies. An Interview with Allan Sekula," in ibid., 245. Installation views of *War Without Bodies* at Atlanta College of Art Gallery (1998), 244–45.

The sublimating relationship between warfare on one hand and masculine erotic feelings on the other hand is well known and does not need an exhaustive exposé. What is of interest to the discussion here is how photographic theory and photographic art practice have both contributed not only to our understanding of the complex intermingling between Eros and Polemos, but also to countering it. One among many other possible references may be of help in this context. It is an iconic image, which has been famously analyzed by a variety of eminent photo historians, including Stephen Bull, Victor Burgin, and Ian Jeffrey: *General Wavell Watches his Gardener at Work* (1941) by James Jarché. The photograph shows the English colonial General Archibald Wavell overlooking his garden while an African man is threshing his master's lawn by means of a manual mower that he is pushing in front of him. Contrary to what the image's title suggests, the General is not watching his gardener at work but instead is looking straightforward into the camera and thus to us, the spectator.

Victor Burgin has therefore famously analyzed this photograph in terms of connoting the inscription of "paternalistic imperialism."[24] Building upon psychoanalytic fetish theory, he develops a reading of this image that focuses on the phallus. Explaining that elongated objects can be immediately linked to the penis—especially when explicitly positioned in the extension of a man's legs, the image is further understood by Burgin as placing the two men "within the implied opposition *capital/labour* [emphasis in original]" and within the orientalist, phantasmagoric opposition "*Western/Eastern* [emphasis in original]"—an opposition "englobing the marks of radical 'otherness.'"

Even if such a response to the apparent banality of the photograph's subject may come out as "*excessive* [emphasis in original]"—as Burgin himself is the first to admit—it is indeed via such reading that one may come to grasp ideological meanings underlying the image's more obvious significance. The image not only powerfully embodies a master-slave dialectic, but it also reveals racial connotations of sexual anxiety and libido, as the gardener's stick can be understood as the form of a scythe cutting through the photographic image. Seen this way, Burgin explains, the gardener generates a feeling of loss in the mind of the viewer: he appears out of place, as "an intruder in what presumably is his own land." We thus are, shockingly, confronted with the sad view of a masculine power game that teaches us once more how the world was ruled in 1941.

What about today? Let us briefly reconsider Sekula's Polish farmer in this light. Remembering Lewandowska's story, which says that the farmer had "modern-looking German tractors" at hand, one is tempted to conclude

24 Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs (1977)," in *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan; 1982), 147–50.

that he suddenly somehow appears out of time. Why, one wonders, would a man continue to do this manual labor when there are so many hectares of grass needing to be mowed and when he has machines to do it? Sekula's explicit zooming in on the man's outstretched hand, and particularly on his lefthand thumb, therefore, appears to suggest something else. This appears all the more striking in combination with a photograph, from the Summer of 2009, of F-16 planes taking off at a Polish Air Force base nearby, which Sekula put on the back cover of the *Polonia and Other Fables* catalogue. What masculine power games and organized violence are being carefully hidden behind the screens that cover the apparent uses of these remote airports?

In the *Polonia and Other Fables* catalogue, Sekula includes a text fragment right after the triptych that reads, "Poland is the 51st state… Americans have no idea."[25] The remark appeared in the *New York Times* in June 2008 and is attributed to James L. Pavitt, former director of CIA clandestine service. In light of this phrasing, Sekula's farmer not only appears out of time but also, and more importantly, somehow out of place. He is in Poland, but where is Poland if it has indeed become the 51st State of the USA? Invisibly connected with the "Homeland" via underwater vessels, airplanes, and satellite technology? No doubt he was hinting at this. It is surely not a coincidence that Sekula, already in 1989, paid a visit to the Holy Loch base for American nuclear submarines in Scotland and photographed it.[26]

Technological communication has indeed, as Trevor Paglen writes, allowed an "annihilation of space by time," as he famously brings to mind Karl Marx.[27] Spaces that were traditionally distant and remote from one another have now become intrinsically connected, often in barely visual and tangible ways. In Paglen's photographic research, the submarine's phallic, oval shape transforms into that of a blurred airplane, such as in *Large Hangars and Fuel Storage, Tonopah Test Range, NV; Distance ~ 18 miles* (2005),[28] or, stronger even, into that of a drone, as in *Reaper Drone, Indian Springs, NV; Distance ~ 2 miles* (2010).[29] Almost as invisible in everyday life as the submarine, the drone nevertheless bears similarly erotic suggestions.

The Blur: A Matter of Protection

Trevor Paglen's images often contain key elements that are as abstracted or blurred as the hidden presences in our lives that he wishes to confront us

25 Sekula, *Polonia and Other Fables*, 13.
26 This image is slide 42 of the *Dismal Science* chapter of *Fish Story* (1990–1995), chapter 8. This chapter is partly published in Sekula, *Dismal Science*, 191–206 (but does not include this photograph).
27 Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map*, 43.
28 The photograph is reproduced in Trevor Paglen, *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2010), 35.
29 The photograph is reproduced in Holmes, "Visiting the Planetarium," 17.

with. We have to look closely, for example, to find the presence of a drone. As is also always the case in Sekula's work, the captions play a decisive role in turning Paglen's photographs into politically loaded images. In the previous example, it is the title of the work that confirms to us that a drone is there, and that we, as visitor, are encouraged to search for it carefully. This focus on abstraction and on the blur is deliberate. It is a central aspect of Paglen's entire body of work, and a formal strategy that he shares with Harun Farocki. It is, of course, a didactic instrument: encouraging the viewer to see through the obvious information, to look at what is hidden inside of the image. From there, the underlying hope is to empower the spectator. There is a wish that the visitor walks out of the exhibition room, back into the world, perceiving everyday reality from a different angle.

Brian Holmes writes the following with regard to Paglen's use of the blur: "The distance, the dust in the air, the shimmers of heat convection that break up the detail of the images are perceptual metonyms of this resistance to democratic oversight that defines the black world, and indeed, so much of contemporary military activity."[30] Thomas Keenan, for his part, has emphasized, while discussing Harun Farocki's essay film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Images of the World and the Inscription of War)* (1988), that the "blur is the mark of our implication, the collapse of distance and our exposure to the image."[31] Keenan adds:

> How to see a blur?—not a blur of motion but one of magnification, the explosion of a still to its *unsignifying* points. Or rather: how to *read* a blur, not a blur of vision but one of light, the dissociated points of what is finally the only enlightenment worthy of the name [emphasis in original].

There is pessimism underlying Keenan's tone. But it is not one that leads to discouragement. From the shock of a lack of "enlightenment" in this world grows a sincere artistic activism. From the deception about the way photographic images are incorporated in mass-media discourse arises a will to empower the photographic image artistically. The photograph needs to be able "to show the world in a particular way," Paglen emphasizes in conversation with Julian Stallabrass.[32] There is a certain enigma to such phrasing, and Paglen's photographs may indeed appear ambiguous, as Brian Holmes has argued while explaining how they call to mind the longstanding tradition of the sublime in photography. "[E]ncounters with the technological sublime,"[33] as Holmes calls it, are a visual strategy

30 Ibid., 18.
31 Thomas Keenan, "Light Weapons," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 210.
32 Julian Stallabrass, "Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen," *October* 138 (Fall 2011): 14.
33 Holmes, "Visiting the Planetarium," 22.

in photography that the military complex itself as well uses amply for propagandistic goals. Paglen's images, such as of the moon or of satellites, at first sight come out as closely resembling those circulated by the military. Yet from their integration in an artistic context, something peculiar happens while experiencing them. For, contrary to the military apparatus, Paglen integrates the information contained in such "technologically sublime" pictures into the disturbing story that he wishes to convey. As a consequence of that, the photographs' meanings shift rather dramatically.

A key aspect in the traditional definition of the sublime experience of art is that the spectator is instantly reassured to know her own body to be at safe distance from the danger that is represented in the work. With regard to the themes that Paglen's photographs address, we increasingly know this to be untrue: drones have already killed innocent people, although not yet in "our" countries. And, on an everyday basis lately, information is revealed to us about how the U.S. National Security Agency has access to all our most personal secrets and data. Paglen's photographs therefore are only apparently sublime. As Julian Stallabrass suggests, Paglen uses the sublime as a successful protective strategy.[34] It is a tactic of auto-protection, of survival perhaps, both in and outside of the art world. To those who are willing to see through this strategy, there is a real threat that is transmitted via his photographs, and "our" bodies overwhelmingly feel it.

Michael Fried writes of Andreas Gursky's pictures,

> there is a consequent loosening of the connection between the picture itself and its real-world source or origin, which is to say a loosening, verging in certain pictures on total dissolution, of the "indexicality" that...has been considered photography's primary identifying trait.[35]

Such a "loosening" of the connection between the photograph and the reality it refers to is unimaginable in the case of Trevor Paglen. Both the works' titles and the books that he writes provide a strong embedding of his images: they turn them into composing parts of a wider story. As in the case of Sekula, one may argue that there is an accumulative principle underlying his work: each new piece—be it a photographic sequence, a text, or a video—deliberately builds up on previous work, and engages in dialogue with it. Sekula famously identified this as the "larger montage" that was at play within his oeuvre.[36] Thus Paglen's work constructs itself as a whole, from a "critical geographic perspective," as he writes.[37] From that perspective, "the notion of a free-standing work of art would be seen as the fetishistic effect of a production process. Instead of

34 Stallabrass, "Negative Dialectics," 13.
35 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 166.
36 Risberg, "Imaginary Economies," 238.
37 Paglen, "Experimental Geography," n.p.

approaching art from the vantage point of a consumer, a critical geographer might reframe the question of art in terms of spatial practice."

In this vein, both Paglen and Farocki's works come out as having something substantial to say about the world surrounding us because they can be understood as an analytic, critical inscription of a reality they aspire to understand. No major manipulations of the image have taken place during the process of production. Photography and film testify to an attitude, a way of approaching reality, to a particular method: the artwork is not only the result of a committed process of investigation but also a personally experienced record of it. Photography and film thus become a privileged instrument to artistically contribute to imagining a more egalitarian world. It becomes their task to offer an analysis and initiate a debate on our political, social, and economic condition, and thus actively take part in the genesis of transformative social processes.

What Follows: Inventing New Human Rights

Consensus increases that artistic activism is a dire necessity in today's world. In a recent statement (2012) for the Seventh Berlin Biennale, its curator, Artur Żmijewksi, made a strong case for an art that "makes its mark on reality, and opens a space where politics can be performed."[38] Ariella Azoulay's *Unshowable Photographs / Different Ways Not To Say Deportation*, an installation of drawings and texts relating to the beginnings of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and shown at the 2012 Triennale in Paris, may serve to illustrate further that what is at stake in the current situation.[39] The International Committee of the Red Cross *refused to give her permission to exhibit photographs from their archive*. In response, Azoulay decided to make drawings in the archive of the images that she wanted to exhibit. She presented these drawings on reading tables, along with explanatory texts. Thus she rendered these photographs, which remained "hidden" against her will, back their status of testimonies to a history and a truth that are silenced by reigning mechanisms of power.

Ariella Azoulay has constructed an influential theoretical and artistic body of work in which she aims at pushing our imagination as far as possible: she proposes to plant seeds of new human rights. In the context of an exhibition that she guest curated at STUK in Leuven, Belgium, entitled *Potential History*, Azoulay has claimed her "right not to be a perpetrator,"

38 Artur Żmijewski, "Artur Żmijewski, Curator of the Berlin Biennale, Writes About the Seventh Edition." Available at: http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int_sec=2&int_new=55086#.UBu44KDhcV4[/url], last accessed Sept. 13, 2013.

39 A booklet bearing the same title was published on the occasion by Fillip Editions in Vancouver. Cf. also http://www.latriennale.org/en/artists/ariella-azoulay, last accessed Sept. 13, 2013.

referring to the context of Israel / Palestine.[40] She has, on the same occasion, also powerfully made a case for the right of each and every one on this planet "to imagine one's future." Such proposals may be much less wild than one would at first think. Human rights have, historically, always resulted from growing social consensus, and often in direct response to indignation about stories that had come to see the light of day.

A powerful moment in Trevor Paglen's book *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World* is when he writes the following:

> I wondered how many taxpayer-funded discoveries about aerospace engineering were realized in the black world, never to see the light of day. How many scientists spent their lives working out breakthroughs to cutting-edge engineering problems whose results would never appear in the peer-reviewed literature?

In line with Azoulay's proposals, should we—understood as "these" and "those" bodies altogether—not reclaim our right to transparency of information? Stronger, should we not start urging for our newly imagined right not to contribute to funding the black world via public taxes? Shouldn't we claim the right to have access to all results of scientific research?

Of course, as Allan Sekula has powerfully asserted, in the "American military-Keynesian economy…government spending on war is a big motor of prosperity." But, he immediately adds, it is also "a source of social imbalance."[41] Stronger even, and here again Sekula aligns with Harun Farocki, war is also "one big industrial accident."[42] The same is true for the classified satellites, as Trevor Paglen adds to the debate: although most of them are "invisible to the unaided eye, their earthly footprint is tremendous."[43] Again, should we then not propose our right not to participate to this form of destruction of the earth?

Art photographs that intend to contribute to such sensitizing of the general public, Sekula has poignantly asserted to Debra Risberg, may come out to the larger audience as a kind of "dismal science," as the "negative of poetry, the 'gay science.'"[44] Since such photographs, Sekula pursues on the same occasion, intend to "challenge the prevailing dogma of art's fundamental 'irresponsibility,'" they tend to cause embarrassment and their message is often disregarded.[45] Yet this does not prevent Harun Farocki, Trevor Paglen, Ariella Azoulay, and Allan Sekula from practicing

40 Cf. the booklet that accompanied this exhibition, which ran from April until June 2012.

41 Risberg, "Imaginary Economies," 238.

42 Ibid., 245.

43 Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map*, 105.

44 Risberg, "Imaginary Economics," 237.

45 Cf., on this topic, also Tom Holert, "Burden of Proof: Contemporary Art and Responsibility," *Artforum* (March 2013), 250–59 and 298.

art as a dismal science. They consciously and proactively refuse the option of resting complacent with the current state of affairs in society. They create an art that is outraged with the excessive outgrowths of neoliberal economy, deregulated capitalism, and the uneven divisions of the present world order. Actively aware that artistic activism is always to be situated on the relatively inoperative level of "a virtual community between spectators," as Sharon Sliwinski has sharply remarked, their art nevertheless prefers that imagination of a more egalitarian world above one that contributes to further increasing fundamental inequality.[46]

This is the role that, in my opinion, is the most urgent for the photographic and filmic image as art today: namely to activate its mobilizing potential with regard to rethinking human solidarity in contemporary society, to break through fixed patterns, and to help imagining alternatives in the forms of new fundamental rights and duties. Important sources of inspiration here are Walter Benjamin, whose writings emphasize a belief in an art that can change reality rather than merely reflect or contemplate it, and Jacques Rancière, whose recent writings are to be interpreted as a strong plea against all attempts to depoliticize aesthetics. Within the realm of artistic activism, photography and film thus become tools for political dialogue. They allow for the play between aesthetics and politics to be opened up to the dream of freedom. What we need, Paglen writes, following Walter Benjamin, is an art that moves "beyond 'critique' as an end in itself" and that can "take up a 'position' within the politics of lived experience."[47]

Even if there is a strong utopian aspect to such a "new humanism" undertaking, as Paglen readily admits to Julian Stallabrass, it is worth the effort.[48] It is urgent to create artworks today that resist the "silence of information," as Brianne Cohen has written in the context of her in-depth analysis of the works of Harun Farocki.[49] For, along with this silencing of information, comes a lack of stories. Bringing to mind Walter Benjamin, T. J. Demos emphasizes how human beings need storytelling in order to "translate experience and facilitate remembrance."[50] Communities need storytelling as an "ethical glue," as a "social means to convey wisdom, offer council, and guidance."

46 Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.
47 Paglen, "Experimental Geography," n.p.
48 Stallabrass, "Negative Dialectics," 14.
49 Brianne Cohen, *Contested Collectivities: Europe Reimagined by Contemporary Artists*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Pittsburgh, 2012), 45.
50 T. J. Demos, "War Games: A Tale in Three Parts (On Omer Fast's *5,000 Feet is the Best*)," in Omer Fast, *5,000 Feet is the Best* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 82. The following quotation is on the same page. Demos is referring to Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 83–109.

In his own time, Benjamin mourned the replacement of stories by mere information, and considered it an impoverishment of communicable experience caused by the age of mechanized warfare, advanced capitalism, and commercial print media that typified the 20th century as he saw it developing. Today, in the age when information is increasingly hidden on a structural basis, it is all the more crucial to revalorize the aura of storytelling, and to turn to establishing bonds via the construction of stories that can be collectively shared.[51] Storytelling not only prototypically allows for the incorporation of ghosts into the narration, but it also is an ideal seamstress of intersubjective and bodily contacts, in which no need is felt for problematic, sublimating mechanisms.[52]

A final story to end with, one about which public information has been strikingly scarce. On July 22, 2013, news was spread that hundreds of inmates escaped from Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, Iraq. Where have they disappeared to, and what will they do next? How can we stop these specters from becoming revenants that will kill, in their turn? When will we start conceiving of all of them not in terms of terrorists but as fellow citizens? Citizenship, Azoulay argues, is not simply "a legal status granted by the sovereign state to its governed subjects."[53] Citizenship needs to be understood "as a form of being-together, a form of sharing a world with others." Photography and film as practiced by the artists discussed in this text are key events in making this happen.[54] Such works can create "opportunities," as Thomas Keenan has argued.[55] They are statements, stories, pictures that fill the empty space of concealment and disinformation. As Walter Benjamin concludes, "The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself."[56]

51 Cf. to this extent as well the dialogical research project conducted by T. J. Demos and me, which resulted in our jointly edited book publication *In and Out of Brussels: Figuring Postcolonial Africa and Europe in the Films of Herman Asselberghs, Sven Augustijnen, Renzo Martens, and Els Opsomer* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012).
52 See also T. J. Demos's recent plea for a "spectro-aesthetics" via the photographs of Trevor Paglen. By "spectro-aesthetics," Demos means an image regime that encourages us to live "more justly" with the specters, in order for them to help us in "reinventing the future": T. J. Demos, "Spectro-Aesthetics 1/4: On (In)Sensible Politics," *Camera Austria* 121 (2013): 74.
53 As quoted from the already mentioned booklet that accompanied Azoulay's exhibition at STUK in Leuven. The following quotation is from the same booklet.
54 Cf. also Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination. A Political Ontology of Photography* (London, New York: Verso, 2012), in particular the first chapter, in which Azoulay defines photography as an event.
55 Thomas Keenan, "Mobilizing Shame," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103: 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 435.
56 Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 109.

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Evidence of What?
Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen Picture Homeland Insecurity

Jonathan Kahana

"*Umlenkung*"

In a brief review of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the experimental filmmaker Ed Emshwiller—who was supposed to work with Stanley Kubrick on the final sequence of the film—makes an oblique reference to *Project Apollo*, an experimental documentary Emshwiller had been making in 1968 about the Apollo space program for the United States Information Agency. By way of criticizing the realism of *2001*, Emshwiller mentions his Apollo film: "I've just spent the past six months making an impressionistic film of Project Apollo and have encountered a lot of bureaucrats and spaceman types. Some I liked and some I didn't, but in all cases they were somehow more textured than their counterparts in *2001*." Kubrick's depictions of "bureaucrats and spacemen," he says, simply needed more "detail": "There don't seem to be any wrinkles or grease spots on either the people or the machines."[1]

Emshwiller's reference to "bureaucrats and spacemen" is a little puzzling in relation to his own film. Ostensibly a documentary about the building of an Apollo rocket and the activities of the various departments at NASA that helped launch the moon shot, we see relatively few bureaucrats or astronauts. Or, rather, we don't see any men in space, only men dressed for space, or pretending to be in space; and although we see plenty of the *mise-en-scène* of late 20th-century super-power research and development (men working at desks and drafting tables and computers; women typing; massive pieces of military technology; electronic and robotic systems of assembly and control), it is difficult to tell which of these professionals should properly be identified as "bureaucrats" in their occupational, class, or political status. In Emshwiller's portrait, bureaucracy seems to be the opposite of the old juridical adage about pornography: we don't know how to define it, but we know it when we see it. In a film made by one American state agency about the intelligence work of research and development at another state agency, one would expect to see bureaucracy everywhere in the frame. But where is it?

Anticipating the hypervisible security state pictured by Trevor Paglen and Harun Farocki, Emshwiller documents an obscenity no longer covered

1 Ed Emshwiller, "*2001: A Space Odyssey*: A Review," *Magazine of Fantasy and Science-Fiction* 207 (August 1968): 63–65.